

Leah Gilula

RABIN'S MURDER – TRIAL AND ERROR.  
ON «THE MURDER OF ISAAC» BY MOTTI LERNER\*

Motti Lerner (born 1949) is one of Israel's celebrated playwrights and screenwriters. Mathematics and physics, not theatre, were his first career choice as a youngster. However, during his mandatory army service he participated, in 1973, in the Yom Kippur War (Day of Atonement War), an experience that changed his world view<sup>1</sup>. Upon returning to civil life he joined protests against the government and abandoned a career in sciences in favour of theatre studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and later in England and the USA. Lerner's professional theatre career began with the founding of an experimental theatre group for which he wrote texts and directed its performances (1977-1978). When the troupe dissolved he joined the Jerusalem Khan Theatre, a unique small repertoire theatre, located in an old Ottoman inn. Lerner started his work as an artistic advisor, but a career of directing was his desire and he actually directed several plays, among them some children plays that he wrote himself. Writing became his vocation unexpectedly when The Khan Theatre looked for, and could not find, a playwright to write a play about Israel (Rudolf) Kastner [Kasztner] (1906-1957), one of the Hungarian Jews' leaders who negotiated in 1944 with Adolf Eichmann to allow Jews to leave Hungary unharmed in exchange for money<sup>2</sup>. Lerner conducted a thorough research, interviewed survivors

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<sup>1</sup> The Yom Kippur War (also October War; Ramadan War; 6-25 October 1973), initiated by the Arab states coalition, broke on the Jewish fasting day, Yom Kippur, and came as a complete surprise to Israel and its citizens. Eventually Israel managed to defeat her enemies but the price was heavy – many died on all sides. The war changed public opinion in Israel. Continuing protests against the government and the army, led the Prime Minister, Golda Meir, to resign.

<sup>2</sup> After the war Kastner continued his political career in Israel. A pamphlet published in 1953 accused him of collaborating with the Nazis and the Israeli government sued the man who published it. Unfortunately the trial turned against Kastner. The

and people associated with Kastner, read autobiographies, legal documents, and academic publications. The result was a historical political docudrama play, a genre then new in Israel. Since Lerner no longer worked at The Khan, the play was staged at The Cameri Theatre (1985), one of Israel's leading theatres. It attracted extensive media attention, was performed more than 300 times and won the best play award of the year. Lerner tasted success, as well as harsh criticism and accusations on the way he introduced historical facts and portrayed his characters. In subsequent plays Lerner continued to portray historical and political personalities, such as David Ben-Gurion's wife Paula in *Paula* (1987) or Jonathan Pollard, the spy Israel recruited in the USA, in *Pollard* (1995); and to deal also with political and social issues at the heart of Israeli society's debate, such as *Pangs of the Messiah* (1987) about right-wing settlers in the West Bank who blow up holy mosques to interfere with the peace process; or *Coming Home* (2003) about a soldier affected by experiences of his army service at the occupied territories. Though he wrote on other topics as well, Lerner became known chiefly as a political playwright and screenwriter.

Heated reactions, vital public debates and protests followed each new play Lerner presented and became expected<sup>3</sup>. The uproar is not surprising, not only in view of the emotional involvement of Israeli citizens in political and social issues, but also since theatre in Israel is very popular, the most popular art in the country<sup>4</sup>. The leading repertoire theatres – Habima, The Cameri, Beit Lessin and Gesher – are located in Tel Aviv, the centre of the country. Three other repertoire theatres are considered peripheral: The Khan Theatre in Jerusalem, The Haifa Theatre in the north and The Beer-Sheva Theatre in the south<sup>5</sup>. Lerner's plays were produced by the three leading repertoire theatres in Tel Aviv – Habima, The Cameri, Beit Lessin – as well as The Haifa

judge proclaimed that «Kastner sold his soul to the devil» and found him guilty. Kastner appealed to the Supreme Court, however, public opinion turned against him and he was assassinated. The Supreme Court exonerated him after his death. The debate whether Kastner was a collaborator or a hero arouses emotions in Israel even today.

<sup>3</sup> Lerner's political film and television scripts attracted similar reactions.

<sup>4</sup> I address the Hebrew speaking theatres, that are the majority, but in Israel theatres speaking Arabic, English, Russian, Yiddish, Amharic and even Moroccan are also active. They all have devoted audiences.

<sup>5</sup> More on the theatre in Israel see: *Theater in Israel*, edited by Linda Ben-Zvi, Ann Arbor (MI), University of Michigan Press, 1996. The theatre scene in Israel has developed immensely since this book has been published, especially the Fringe Theatre, small theatre troupes striving to create an artistic and thematic alternative.

Theatre<sup>6</sup>. Facing the heated reactions and protests, eventually the theatres were reluctant to stage Lerner's plays. Nevertheless, he refused to be discouraged and year after year continued to present his new plays to theatres in Israel, but in vain. Indeed, Lerner paid a heavy price for his political plays. Salvation came from Europe and the USA, where his plays were produced and he experienced success again.

*The Murder of Isaac*, a play that Lerner started to compose in 1995 immediately after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, the Prime Minister of Israel, is again a political play<sup>7</sup>. Only after it received its primary attention in Europe and the USA, *The Murder of Isaac* was given one professional stage reading in Israel. Initially, Beit Lessin and later Habima (that had one preliminary work reading of the play in July 2006) expressed an interest in producing the play, but eventually abandoned their intention.

I will write just what I want to write, in a theatrical style I consider appropriate, from a world view that I wish to introduce into the public and political de-

<sup>6</sup> Recently The Khan Theatre staged a new political play by Lerner, and The Beer-Sheva Theatre staged a revival of *Pangs of the Messiah*.

<sup>7</sup> Yitzhak Rabin (1922-1995), after a distinguished military career, as a general and later Chief of Staff of Israel's army (IDF), entered politics and was elected twice as Prime Minister of Israel. In his second term Rabin strived to reach a peace agreement with the Palestinians. He and the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, signed the Oslo Accords (1993) that acknowledged the Palestinian Authority and set grounds for a permanent peace agreement. The Oslo Accords divided Israeli society. Some supported it eagerly, others opposed it strongly. Leaders of right wing parties and rabbis regarded Rabin a traitor willing to relinquish to the Palestinians parts of Israel. Some of them openly called for his assassination. These calls affected deeply a young radical right wing religious student of law, Yigal Amir. He attended a crowded peace rally, supporting the peace process, that took place at a central Tel Aviv Square (Kikar Malchei Israel). When Rabin turned to leave the rally Amir shot him. He was sentenced to life imprisonment. Rabin's assassination shocked Israeli society. Many returned to the square to mourn together, light candles and sing songs. Today the square is named Rabin Square and a monument in his memory is set where he was shot. More about Rabin's assassination and its aftermath see: Dana Arieli-Horowitz, *Creators in Overburden: Rabin's Assassination, Art and Politics*, Jerusalem, Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design and The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2005 (Hebrew); *Contested Memory – Myth, Nation and Democracy: Thoughts After Rabin's Assassination*, edited by Lev Grinberg, Beer-Sheva, Humphrey Institute for Social Research - Ben Gurion University, 2000 (Hebrew); Amnon Kapeliouk, *Rabin – un assassinat politique*, an updated Hebrew edition, Tel Aviv, Sifriat Poalim, 1996; Michael Karpin and Ina Friedman, *Murder in the Name of God: The Plot to Kill Yitzhak Rabin*, New York, Metropolitan Books, 1998; *The Assassination of Yitzhak Rabin*, edited by Yoram Peri, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000; Yoram Peri, *Brothers at War: Rabin's Assassination and the Cultural War in Israel*, Tel Aviv, Babel, 2005 (Hebrew).

bate [in Israel] – declared Lerner, and added –, the price I pay is not important anymore. I am 60 years old. A significant part of my career is already behind me. Though I pay a heavy price, though I am partly exiled from Israeli theatre because of my insistence on dealing with radical political themes, I think that I was not mistaken in my decisions<sup>8</sup>.

Among all the plays Lerner wrote *The Murder of Isaac* is most important to him, if not the most important. He feels that outside Israel there is a lack of understanding of the play's context and of its layers.

This is a play written in Israel, by an Israeli, for Israelis – Lerner explains –, abroad it will always miss its true purpose. I crave to sit with Israeli actors, to work with them on the deciphering of Israeli society's essence, not with actors from abroad who are not familiar with our society. I find it difficult to accept that this play does not contribute its share to the political and cultural debate in Israel.

Since some of Lerner's other plays have a historical personality at their centre, it could have been expected that the play would be about Yitzhak Rabin. The outcome is different. Neither Rabin nor his murder are the core. The play *The Murder of Isaac* takes place three years after Rabin's assassination, in 1998. The plot is set in a rehabilitation centre, while war is raging on Israel's borders. Radio newscasts are heard announcing dead and wounded. The inmates at the rehabilitation centre are men and women of various ages, traumatized in diverse circumstances, each in a different war, each with his own painful story and inner anguish. Some inmates are not only emotionally traumatized but also physically injured: blinded, amputated, or disfigured by burns. The main characters are the inmates Binder, Lola, Yuda and Yigal. Binder, the leader, was wounded in war and suffers from constant fear of being assassinated. As part of the therapeutic treatment at the rehabilitation centre psychodrama is used and Binder urges the inmates to write and present a play – a dramatization of the events leading to Rabin's murder. He is the moderator of the play and is cast in the leading role of Yitzhak Rabin. The three other main characters act in the play-within-the-play the leading roles of Leah Rabin (Rabin's wife), the head of the opposition party (at the time Benjamin Netanyahu who opposed the Oslo Accords) and the assassin Yigal Amir. The attitudes and feelings of the inmates towards each other mirror, to a degree, the relationships of the historical

<sup>8</sup> Motti Lerner, interview by the author, 8 September 2009 (Hebrew). All the following quotes are from this interview.

figures that they enact. Therefore, the play *The Murder of Isaac* consists of a double plot of intertwined actions: the real life in the hospital and the play the inmates perform. Lerner describes the hospital reality as *a plot of disturbances* that includes both the attitudes of the inmates towards the play-within-the-play they perform and towards the roles they act in it, as well as their personal dealings with the war raging outside the hospital's walls and their battle with the memories and the pain that it arouses. The inmates, as well as the main characters, voice their political beliefs boldly and sharply, especially in the songs included in the play-within-the-play, and proclaim arguments and attitudes representing the range of opinions in Israel, moderate as well as extreme. At the end of the play *the plot of disturbances* reigns and Yigal, the inmate, murders the inmate Binder because of ideological differences.

*The Murder of Isaac* is a painful play about Israeli society. The hospital represents the State of Israel, the inmates – its citizens. Each inmate and his wounds is a reminder of one of Israel's wars, even wars with no official name. As portrayed by the inmates, Israeli society is familiar only with wars and each citizen carries within himself pain and bereavement. The hate the different society's segments feel for each other, not the hate of the enemy, is what causes destruction. Ideological differences existed before Rabin's murder and they are presented in the play by arguments voiced by the inmates in their play-within-the-play. But after the murder, as the play's end clarifies, the differences deepened, became extreme and created hate that is difficult to quench and that threatens to develop into a civil war<sup>9</sup>.

Reflecting on how to write a good play Lerner said:

I don't have clear answers. All I can recommend is a long and arduous process of trial and error. Such a process does not occur frequently enough in Israel. ... The majority of theatres have no patience for a long process of readings and discussions ... the directors demand consummate and impeccable plays, but playwrights are unable to perfect such plays without an adequate process of development. The more complex and profound the play, the longer the process of development<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> More on the play see: Gad Keynar, *Introduction. The Illusion that One Can Redeem the World by Writing is a Vital Component in the Drive to Write*, in Motti Lerner, *Seven Plays*, Tel-Aviv, Safra and Assaph Plays, 2009, pp. 12-15 (Hebrew).

<sup>10</sup> Motti Lerner, *Is There Any Hope in Political Theatre?*, speech delivered at The Cameri Theatre, 30 October 2009, on the occasion of launching his book, *Seven Plays*, cit. For a published version of this speech see: «Bamoth ve-Masach», no. 4, 2009, pp. 19-27 (Hebrew).

*The Murder of Isaac* is a fine example of a play that traveled a long way before reaching its published version in 2009<sup>11</sup>. Since it was rejected by theatres in Israel, the process of development, desired by Lerner, occurred in theatres in Europe and the USA. In translation the play was staged three times, once in Germany and twice in the USA, and also had several stage readings. The work on the different productions of the play helped Lerner, who took part in the rehearsals, to polish the plot and perfect the characters.

From the description of the rehearsals and of the changes that the play underwent, the reader will sense the disquieting nature of theatre and the meaning of political theatre in a country living in extreme conditions, such as Israel.

#### *The Initial Versions*

A week after Rabin's assassination Lerner arrived at The Cameri Theatre of Tel-Aviv for a planned meeting with the theatre's administrative and artistic directors, Noam Semel and Omri Nitzan, to discuss a play he was working on for The Cameri. The painful atmosphere of the murder's aftermath hung over the meeting and all its three participants agreed that the assassination had to be addressed. It was decided to change the previous agreement with Lerner and to have him write a new play on Rabin's murder.

Lerner searched a long time for a suitable approach and proper theatrical tools to deal with the murder that evoked in him deep anger and hatred. He initially entertained the idea of using analogy – to write a historical play based on the murder of Gedaliah Ben Ahikam, the last Governor of the Kingdom of Judea, appointed by the king of Babel and assassinated in 586 BC. He hoped that the relegation of the plot to an ancient period would enable him to deal with the sensitive subject. The Cameri agreed and Lerner started writing. However, after several months he realized that the political and social context of 586 BC was entirely different from the state of affairs in Israel, disallowing analogy. He abandoned the idea.

Subsequently he decided to compose a plot presented from the point of view of the dying Rabin, lasting from the moment he was shot till his death, similar to the plot of Joshua Sobol's play *A Jewish Soul* (*The Last Night of Otto Weininger*), that evolves in Weininger's

<sup>11</sup> Motti Lerner, *Seven Plays*, cit., pp. 135-198.

thoughts at the time of his suicide. After a few months this concept was abandoned as well. Lerner explained: «I could not contain the dying Rabin. Because I felt too close to him, because of the great anguish caused by his death, I could not contain him within myself. Whenever I started to write, the pain was so deep that I could not go on»<sup>12</sup>.

Two years after the assassination Lerner found a new and final perspective: to place the plot in a rehabilitation centre for victims of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). He was influenced by Peter Weiss's renowned play *Marat/Sade*. Lerner began to study PTSD. He read medical literature, visited hospitals where sufferers of the disorder were treated, participated in treatment meetings and held conversations with the medical staff. It helped him to understand the phenomenon better and to create credible characters.

The composing of the play's first version lasted a year. By the time Lerner presented it to The Cameri Theatre three years had passed since Rabin's murder. It was rejected on the spot. The first theatre that expressed an interest in Lerner's new play was the Municipal Theatre of Heilbronn, Germany, that previously produced two of his plays, *Kastner* (1988) and *Autumn* (1996)<sup>13</sup>. It was the first stage in a long and arduous process. The premiere in Heilbronn took place at the end of 1999, four years after Rabin's death. From that production until 2007 the play was performed, or given a stage reading, once a year. Lerner himself directed a short version of the play with theatre students in San Francisco. At rehearsals of the various productions Lerner had a twofold mission: to import information about Israel, its society, Rabin, his assassination and its aftermath, and simultaneously to hold a dialogue with directors and actors that helped him to fine-tune and polish the plot and perfect the characters. Each stage reading and production contributed its share to the play's improvement. Some changes consisted of drastic shortenings and considerable cutting of the text, others were fine adjustments enhancing precision and clarity. There were no thematic changes.

#### *The Municipal Theatre of Heilbronn, Germany, 1999*

Before the rehearsals began at the Municipal Theatre of Heilbronn,

<sup>12</sup> Lerner confirmed, in an email to me on 9 January 2010, that this was the order of his attempts and not as it appears on the Internet. See: Motti Lerner, «*The Murder of Isaac*» by Motti Lerner not yet in Israel, available from *All About Jewish Theatre*, [http://www.jewish-theatre.com/visitor/article\\_display.aspx?articleID=869](http://www.jewish-theatre.com/visitor/article_display.aspx?articleID=869) [10 July 2011].

<sup>13</sup> In 2003 the theatre staged another play by Lerner, *Coming Home*.

Lerner had a year long discussions with the dramaturges of the theatre and with the director Johannes Klaus. The resulting changes were modifications of structure, mainly sharpening of distinctions between the two intertwined actions of the plot. Lerner described this stage of the writing process:

It became clear to me that the play is about the collective subconscious of the Israelis. They [the Germans] are not familiar with this subconscious and did not understand why I insisted on certain things. They are not familiar with the Israeli society, they do not understand the context of Rabin's assassination. They could not really serve as a supporting factor in the dramaturgy process. There was a process, but it was chiefly structural and it helped me to clarify the various strata of the play, but it was not a thematic process.

Lerner's lack of German precluded him from participating in the rehearsals. He only saw the dress rehearsal and the premiere, which took place on 30 November 1999. Leah Rabin herself attended the premiere. The performance ran 40 times. Lerner recalled: «The play was very impressive, it had very strong moments, but it was not a good play. It was entirely clear that the text was not coherent enough».

One of the problems of the play was the number of characters. During the performance nearly 20 actors sat on stage most of the time, some of them extras added by the director. One of these extras was a former opera singer. Lerner:

In the first act I saw sitting on the stage a very old woman dressed in black. There is no such character in the play. Throughout the performance she said nothing, did nothing. She sat looking at the floor, not even moving her eyes, not listening, not reacting. I asked myself: «What is it for?». At the end of the first act one of the inmates slashes his wrists and everybody cries: «Lights! Lights! Close the curtain!» since they understand that the show has to stop. At that moment she gets up, as if from a lamentation, and sings Gustav Mahler's song about the death of children [from the cycle *Kindertotenlieder*]. It was a shocking scene. The way she sang was truly heart rending.

The director added the old woman and Mahler's song in substitution of a song that he excised, sung by one of the female characters. He explained to Lerner that the song he removed could not be performed in Germany because it is direct, bold and contains a reference to masturbation and to sexual fulfillment. It is probably the last stanza that evoked the German's recoil: *I count every Arab that's fallen / Passion mounting with each one / At the height of salvation I keep counting /*

*And at twenty-nine corpses I come... / Ay, ay, ay... Ay, ay, ay*<sup>14</sup>. Lerner is astonished still: «They told me: “Here we cannot utter this word on stage”. It is ludicrous. Of all the upsetting things in the play this is what bothered them! In all the other productions of the play this song was the most popular».

*Theater J, Washington DC, 2000*

Lerner offered The Cameri the new version that took shape throughout the working process with the Municipal Theatre of Heilbronn. Again it was rejected, this time on the pretext as not yet mature enough for performance. Meanwhile, Theater J in Washington DC, that in 1998 performed Lerner's play *Exile in Jerusalem*, expressed an interest in *The Murder of Isaac*. The theatre commissioned an English translation and asked Lerner to reduce the number of characters. Lerner complied and decreased their number to 12. During the three months of preparations for the stage reading Lerner incorporated additional changes, emendations and refinements.

The stage reading, directed by Ari Roth and Daniel DeRaey, took place on 20 November 2000 and provoked angry reactions. Lerner recalled:

A storm erupted. The reading itself was not interrupted, but in the following discussion an awful uproar raged. People shouted and screamed. I was stunned, stunned. I paled, my mouth went dry. The main complaints were that the play is anti-Semitic, that I am not patriotic, that hate motivated the play's writing, that it represents Jews exactly as Gentiles would like them to be presented and that on account of the performance the local Jewish community will suffer a catastrophe. The theatre's director told me then that he could not stage a full scope performance of the play, he simply could not. By the way, the Israelis that attended the reading liked it.

In Washington, for the first time, Lerner heard the play performed in a language he understood and was able to discern problems he was not aware of previously. Upon returning to Israel he inserted substantial changes, one of them a change of the main characters' names. In the previous versions the names of the inmates and the names of the

<sup>14</sup> Motti Lerner, *The Murder of Isaac. A Play in Two Acts*, trans. Anthony Berris, in *Modern Jewish Plays*, edited by Jason Sherman, n.p., Playwrights Canada Press, 2007, p. 60.

characters they impersonated in the play-within-the-play were identical: Yitzhak, Leah, Benjamin and Yigal. It hindered Lerner's ability to envision the differences and to mold them. Consequently he changed the names of the inmates: Yitzhak became Binder, Leah – Lola, Benjamin – Yuda, Yigal stayed Yigal. Lerner said:

I discovered that there was a certain inner fallacy in the naming of a character Yitzhak. For me Yitzhak was Rabin himself, and I failed to develop the inmate's character as a separate entity. In Germany the impressive presence of the actor who played the part was so forceful that I did not realize that the character was underdeveloped. But in Washington I detected the faults of the character: he had no motive, he did not forward the action and lacked the characteristics of a leading role.

On the character named Benjamin, Lerner confessed: «It was idiotic to identify him with Bibi [Benjamin Netanyahu]. It is wrong. The moment I changed the name, I created a distance between the character and the actual political personality, and consequently had much more freedom in molding the character».

Another fundamental change was the merging of two characters into one. At the stage reading in Washington, Lerner realized that the role of the moderator, that presents the inmates' play, is superfluous. He united him with the main character, Binder, who plays Rabin in the play-within-the-play. Lerner:

Binder became the moderator. Suddenly I understood the group's dynamics: he was the one who initiated the play, he urged others to write, he directed it and he made them do it, because he was a natural leader of the group and also had a strong personal agenda. I gave him a motive and he turned into a full character.

#### *The Famous Door Theatre, Chicago, 2001*

The next stage reading of the play took place in Chicago, at the Famous Door Theatre<sup>15</sup>. It was read only once. The rehearsal period was short, did not result in a new understanding of the play and did not

<sup>15</sup> The theatre was active for eighteen years (1987-2005). One of its great successes was Joshua Sobol's *Ghetto*. On the theatre see: Ann Hudson, *The Famous Door Theatre in Chicago*, available from [http://www.ehow.com/about\\_5460928\\_famous-door-theatre-chicago.html](http://www.ehow.com/about_5460928_famous-door-theatre-chicago.html) [10 July 2011]; Carrie L. Kaufman, *Famous Door Ends 18-Year Run*, available from *Performink Online*, <http://www.performink.com/archives/news/FamousDoorCloses.htm> [10 July 2011].

generate any changes. It is the way and the date in which the theatre contacted Lerner that is interesting: 11 September 2001. Lerner:

At midnight of September 11, I got a phone call from a woman in Chicago: «I read an article about your play. We would like to stage it. With what is happening to us now, it seems the right material» ... The actors were impressive and the reading, under the auspices of the Israeli consulate in Chicago, was quite successful. Still some of the reactions were rather harsh. I remember that the vice-consul left the theatre in anger, and they wanted to fire the consulate's cultural attaché.

*Centerstage Theatre, Baltimore, 2002*

Centerstage Theatre in Baltimore heard about *The Murder of Isaac* from Theater J and expressed a desire to arrange a stage reading. Lerner participated in five days of rehearsals that led to many changes and refinements. Lerner recalled:

The first day we were busy understanding the characters. The other days, after four hours of rehearsal, I ran back to the hotel to write. I wrote and wrote and came to the next rehearsal with a new version, and so on. The actors were very creative and the work immensely interesting. Irene Lewis is a very down to earth director. She told me: «You have to supply answers. If it is not clear to you, it will not be clear to the actors nor to the audience». There I understood what I did not understand previously. The actors' demand to combine the personal with the political clarified how necessary it was. For example the character of Binder: what of his personal biography shaped his political views? At the end of the first act he speaks about his killing of innocents. In Baltimore I understood that Binder is in constant fear of being killed by somebody, assassinated, a fear caused by the feeling of guilt on account of his killing of innocents. That is why he is a paranoiac. All at once I understood that his desire for peace is caused by fear, a result of his paranoia. Binder is a person living in fear of war. At the end of the play we understand that it is not only his fear of getting killed, but his fear that he would have to continue killing.

Throughout the two stage readings in Baltimore, in December 2002, demonstrations were held outside and the theatre received police protection<sup>16</sup>.

*American Conservatory Theater (A.C.T.), San Francisco, 2003*

In January 2003, Lerner was invited to direct *The Murder of Isaac*

<sup>16</sup> Sarit Fuchs, *Whoever Did Fight*, «Maariv», 20 January 2006 (Hebrew).

at the Drama School of the American Conservatory Theater (A.C.T.) in San Francisco<sup>17</sup>. The invitation followed his delivery of a successful lecture series on political theatre. In directing the play, Lerner's central concept was that for the inmates the play-within-the-play was a celebration of sorts, that their excitement was tremendous and each of them was desirous of doing and looking their best. Lerner took the actors to the costumes storeroom. The outfits they chose for themselves helped them shape the two facets of the roles they played: inmates and the characters in the inmates' play.

Lerner admits that the continuing of the text's improvement was much more important to him than the directing. One of the changes he made was to cut out an entire scene in which the leader of the opposition asks the Orthodox Jews to support him and promises, in exchange, to wage a war. In this scene the Orthodox Jews realize that war will benefit them economically: there will be dead, the dead will need grave diggers and funerals and so on. They calculate that 20,000 dead will create 100,000 positions for them and therefore they support the war. Presently Lerner describes this scene as *horrible*. It angered the Israelis who saw the play in Germany. The outrage was so great then that even The Knesset (The Israeli Parliament) discussed the play and one of The Knesset members sent a letter of protest to the Israeli consul in Germany<sup>18</sup>. During the rehearsals in San Francisco, Lerner realized that the scene does not evolve from the plot:

I felt that the scene worked against me. Not because it attacked the Orthodox Jews and presented them in the way it did, that did not bother me so much. The scene could have been a part of the cabaret style of the play, but while rehearsing the play with the students, I was unable to explain how it evolves from the characters. I realized that the scene resulted from my world view, my philosophy and criticism. I cut it out, erased it completely and never regretted it. Just imagine, it was a part of the play for four years, till 2003!

Lerner replaced it with a scene presenting the leader of the opposition comforting mourners and asking one of them, a poet, to write

<sup>17</sup> More on American Conservatory Theater (A.C.T.) see: <http://www.act-sf.org/site/PageServer> [10 July 2011].

<sup>18</sup> Igal Avidan, *The Thing's the Play*, «The Jerusalem Report», 3 January 2000; Rami Hazut, *PM Ravitz Against a Play in Germany*, «Yedioth Ahronoth», 13 December 1999 (Hebrew).

songs supporting wars. He incorporated the new scene exactly in the place of the erased one<sup>19</sup>.

Lerner appreciates creative and thoughtful actors and welcomes comments that help him to sharpen characteristics and deepen the characters' complexities. Two of the students in San Francisco helped him do exactly that. Before he met the actor who was to play the role of Shulamit, the character was a nurse in the hospital. The actor explained to Lerner that a nurse differs from an inmate – she had not experienced trauma, has no motive, and therefore, as an actor, she cannot shape the nurse as another inmate. Lerner: «I was a mature playwright, she was a 22 or 23 years old student. She told me: “Look, I can do what you instruct me to do, but it is not right that I do what I feel is not right”. And she repeated: “You do what you want. I will tell you what I feel is wrong for the character”». Shulamit became one of the inmates and is described now thus:

A 38-year-old religious woman. ... Her husband fought in Lebanon in 1986 and returned home suffering from PTSD, but was never hospitalized. In 1994 a terrorist broke into their home and murdered her husband and two of their children. Since then she has been hospitalized at the center. ... Due to her severe anxiety she is not allowed out of the center ...<sup>20</sup>.

Yuda is another character that underwent changes, thanks to an actor in San Francisco. The character is described so:

51 years old, plays the Leader of the Opposition. He was wounded in the battle for Jerusalem in 1967 and also suffered PTSD. ... His anxiety level is high. Weeping and shouting arouse terror in him. He is considered a dangerous patient who cannot be allowed outside the centre for fear that he will harm those around him. ... He is charismatic, impulsive and belligerent<sup>21</sup>.

The decision to characterize him as a person who cannot bear weeping and shouting resulted from the actor's natural response: whenever someone wept, the actor covered his ears and ran away. Lerner:

The moment I saw it, I embraced it with both arms, it is a fantastic aspect of the character. In the hospital the inmates weep, talk and shout all the time and he cannot stand it. It turned Yuda into a more complex character ... whose weaknesses are

<sup>19</sup> Motti Lerner, *Seven Plays*, cit., pp. 185-187.

<sup>20</sup> Motti Lerner, *The Murder of Isaac*, cit., p. 35.

<sup>21</sup> *Ivi*, p. 34.

caused by his anxieties. This young actor helped me to understand better Yuda's world of anxieties, much better than I previously understood it.

Outside Israel, Lerner told me, *The Murder of Isaac* is interpreted as dealing with political extremism or religious fanaticism, how religious fanatics – Jewish, Christian or Muslim – conquer and control society. In San Francisco Lerner cast an African American actor in the role of Binder, the character imbued with mission and vision. Instantly the actor interpreted the role politically and his acting of Binder was inspired by Martin Luther King.

After three weeks of rehearsals a short version of the play was performed twice. It was the second time that the text was produced as a play. Lerner was uncomfortable with his directing: «I don't have enough experience as a director to direct such a difficult play. It is a complex play, even for seasoned directors».

*Beit Lessin Theatre, Israel, 2004*

On his return to Israel Lerner prepared a new Hebrew version based on the changes that resulted from the San Francisco production. It was given a stage reading – the first one in Israel – by the Beit Lessin Theatre, as part of the Opening a Curtain Festival (13-15 May 2004). Oded Kotler, a renowned actor and director, directed the stage reading. Lerner attended the rehearsals. This reading differed from the previous ones, as Lerner explained:

It was the first time that I worked on the play with Israeli actors, the first time I heard the play in Hebrew. It had a tremendous meaning. Again I introduced many changes, mainly shortenings and clarifications of texts. I was not aware of the lack of precision or clarity of some of the texts till I heard them pronounced in Hebrew.

The music, composed by the acclaimed composer Yossi Ben-Nun, is described by Lerner as Brechtian: «Instantly it got carried away to Kurt Weill, but he [Ben-Nun] made it more modern, gave it a shade of Rock».

The theatre's director, Tzipi Pines, was impressed by the reading and decided to produce the play with Oded Kotler directing. Kotler even arranged for a \$25,000 donation. A production meeting was held, dates and casting discussed, but after some time Pines announced, for unknown reasons, the shelving of the project. It was not the play's final curtain.

*Centerstage Theatre, Baltimore, 2006*

Centerstage Theatre in Baltimore again expressed an interest in the play. This time the director wanted a full scope performance. The updated version, the result of the Beit Lessin reading, was translated into English. Still Lerner asked for a week long workshop before the beginning of rehearsals, in order to insert additional changes. «I admit – Lerner said –, that the workshop provided me with new important insights. It was a period of intensive work. The play reached Baltimore in a much better shape than the reading in Beit Lessin. Finally it got a proper structure of a play, something I can feel comfortable with». Lerner added a new character, a guard, from whom the inmate Yigal snatches the gun at the end of the play. Lerner stated:

In previous versions I claimed that Yigal stole the gun from someone backstage. It did not work. It never worked, not even in Germany, but I did not come up with a better solution. In Baltimore, while rehearsing we realized that he stole the gun from the guard. The guard was busy trying to control the commotion and then Yigal came from behind and stole the gun from him. It was a good solution.

The rehearsals lasted four weeks. Lerner attended the first ten days to provide the necessary background and to explain the play.

The stage directions emphasize that though it seems that the text is realistic, the play should not be restricted to a realistic mode and should strive to find a styled theatre language that exposes the characters' inner world. However, in Baltimore the scenery was strictly realistic: the floor covered with linoleum, bright neon lights, hospital beds and furniture, a clock on the wall showing the actual time. On the right hand side was a piano that accompanied the songs sung by the inmates<sup>22</sup>. The big stage allowed for the presence of all the actors, as the play requires, but Lerner was not happy with it. He felt that it diminished the

<sup>22</sup> The scenery's description is based on photographs and on the following reviews: Jayne Blanchard, *Israeli Hot Potato Luckwarm in U.S.*, «The Washington Times», 13 February 2006; James Howard, *Review: «The Murder of Isaac»: War, Peace and Everything in Between*, 22 February 2006, available from [http://baltimore.broadwayworld.com/article/REVIEW\\_The\\_Murder\\_of\\_Isaac\\_War\\_Peace\\_and\\_Everything\\_In\\_Between\\_20060222](http://baltimore.broadwayworld.com/article/REVIEW_The_Murder_of_Isaac_War_Peace_and_Everything_In_Between_20060222) [10 July 2011]; Peter Marks, «*Murder of Isaac»: The Death of Israel's Conscience*, «The Washington Post», 11 February 2006; Rich See, «*The Murder of Isaac*», available from <http://www.curtainup.com/murderofisaacdc.html> [10 July 2011]; Charles Shubow, *Baltimore's Center Stage Presents «Murder of Isaac»*, 13 February 2006, available from <http://detroit.broadwayworld.com/printcolumn.cfm?id=7483> [10 July 2011].

intensity of the intimate scenes, as well as the impact of the inmates' struggle over their territory<sup>23</sup>.

The wall facing the audience was a brick wall. On it hung pictures of war victims of various 20<sup>th</sup> century wars; on the floor beneath the pictures were lit candles. The pictures highlighted the grave consequences of wars, underlying that even though the play deals with Israel's wars, wars and their victims are universal.

Assuming that the spectators would not be familiar with the history of the State of Israel nor with Rabin's biography, Centerstage Theatre created a detailed program with information aimed at helping to understand the background of the play. The theatre also created for its education program, Next Stage, a detailed study guide to accompany the play and ensuing activities<sup>24</sup>. Meetings and discussions, after the shows, were held with theatre artists, among them Lerner himself, on the subject of the play, on PTSD, and other topics the play touched upon.

The play ran 40 to 50 times (3 February-12 March 2006), the fullest professional production of the play till today. This version with a few minor changes was published in the collection *Modern Jewish Plays*, edited by Jason Sherman<sup>25</sup>. Lerner was happy with the changes the play underwent at the rehearsals and with the performance itself, especially with the high level of acting, not however with all the choices of the director, Irene Lewis. Subsequently Lewis also directed a stage reading of the play at the New York Now! Festival (30 October 2006).

There were other stage readings of the play in French in France and Belgium, and English in Canada, that Lerner did not attend. He resumed working on the Hebrew version of the play when he prepared it for publication in a collection of his plays.

Looking back, Lerner admits that the first version of the play he handed to The Cameri Theatre was structurally unsatisfactory. Not only the play underwent modifications over the years, Lerner himself and his writing skills changed.

<sup>23</sup> See also Mike Giuliano, «*The Murder of Isaac*», 15 February 2006, available from <http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117929646> [10 July 2011]; Mike Giuliano, *At Center Stage, Air is Charged with «Murder»*, «Baltimore Messenger», 16 February 2006; J. Wynn Rousuck, «*The Murder of Isaac* is Volatile and Topical», «The Sun», 9 February 2006; Charles Shubow, *Baltimore's Center Stage Presents «Murder of Isaac»*, 13 February 2006, available from <http://detroit.broadwayworld.com/printcolumn.cfm?id=7483> [10 July 2011].

<sup>24</sup> See: <http://www.centerstage.org/Portals/0/PDF/06.NextStage.Isaac.pdf> [10 July 2011].

<sup>25</sup> Motti Lerner, *The Murder of Isaac*, cit., pp. 29-90.

When I started writing the play – Lerner admitted –, my skills as a playwright were not developed enough. I did not know how to solve many of the structural problems. I was not as yet ripe to write this play. Lack of maturity became an integral part of my working process, I never come to a project mature enough. Never. Maturity develops with work. With time, I think, my writing skills improved.

### *Conclusions*

Examining the process *The Murder of Isaac* underwent, from the first to the published Hebrew version, two types of changes can be discerned. One is the result of the ongoing dialogue of Lerner with non-Israeli directors and actors, who know that a Prime Minister was assassinated, but are not familiar enough with the leaders' personalities, with the ideological trends in Israel and with Israeli society. There is a lot to explain. There are remarks, expressions and body language that for Israelis are self evident. The dialogue with non-Israeli actors and directors can be seen as a blessing, since the need to explain and clarify compelled Lerner to examine his own understanding of Israeli society, of the plot and the characters, and consequently to sharpen his phrasing.

The second type of change was the passing of time, the growing objective distance from the murder. Lerner started writing immediately after the assassination, when agitation and rage ruled in Israel and when he himself was angry and hurt. The proximity to the murder made it impossible to delineate Rabin's character, and hindered finding a right perspective for the play. A historical perspective, that allows an overview devoid of emotional involvement, was lacking. The gradual detachment from the murder and from Lerner's initial intentions enabled him to introduce changes and to distance the play from the historical event that initiated the writing.

### *Epilogue*

Lerner's craving to work on *The Murder of Isaac* with Israeli theatre artists was eventually fulfilled, though with students, not with professionals. In May 2013 a full scope production of the play was finally staged in Hebrew at The Department of Theatre Arts at Tel Aviv University. It was Roe Hertz-Rousso, a Masters Degree student of directing, that chose the play. He told me:

Rabin's murder is an essential experience in my life. I was 18 when he was assassinated, at the peak of my youth. I remember the night of the murder, I was

one of the many who went afterwards to the square [where Rabin was assassinated] to mourn. I remember the feeling of disappointment, of hope being shuttered. The play deals with essential issues of the Israeli society and arouses questions about us. We live in a constant experience of war, we are a society traumatized by war. Even during the rehearsals a war erupted in Gaza with the Palestinians<sup>26</sup>.

Since it was a students' production the play required shortenings. On the necessary changes he incorporated Lerner wrote to me: «The changes indicate mainly the change in my perception of the text, the need to make it sharper, tighter, more minimalist. Coming back to the text I discovered faults that previously I was not aware of, that I did not notice at the productions abroad»<sup>27</sup>.

The play was performed not in a theatre auditorium but in a room that could house only 60 spectators, hence casting them in the role of the family members that come to the hospital to watch the inmates' show. The stage was divided by hospital curtains. The actors did not leave the stage but could disappear behind the curtains, peek and reappear, creating an intense atmosphere. The director wanted to emphasize the post trauma of war and not to treat the inmates as insane, still he added two mute insane characters to address this aspect. The play was performed ten times. The director felt that it created an unsettling experience for the audience.

Usually theatre critics do not attend amateur performances of students. This performance, however, received one professional review by the theatre critic of the popular daily «Yedioth Ahronoth». Shai Bar Yaacov, though mentioning the actors' lack of experience, was impressed by the play and by its conveying the traumatic and emotional wounds of Israeli society, especially of its leaders, and he emphasized the play's importance<sup>28</sup>.

Finally, 14 years after its world premiere, *The Murder of Isaac* gained recognition in Israel of 2013. Lerner needed a period of detachment from the traumatic historical event to form the final version of the play. His audience – Israeli theatre artists and Israeli society – needed a longer period of detachment and a historical perspective to relate to Lerner's point of view and make peace with it.

<sup>26</sup> Roe Hertz-Rousso, telephone interview by the author, 7 June 2013 (Hebrew).

<sup>27</sup> Motti Lerner, email to the author, 3 June 2013 (Hebrew). Additional changes, development of characters and plot, followed discussions with the director of the performance and the dramaturge.

<sup>28</sup> Shai Bar Yaacov, *Kikar Malchei Israel* [Kings of Israel Square], «Yedioth Ahronoth», 9 May 2013 (Hebrew).